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ABSTRACT

Current issues are complex and funding is difficult to obtain as adult education providers try to meet the needs of the community, business, and industry; therefore, collaboration can be very advantageous. Information, ideas, and resources can be pooled, and duplication and harmful competition can be avoided. Four factors that are important for successful relationships are reciprocity in giving and receiving resources, system openness, trust and commitment, and flexible structure. Administrators who can identify bargaining power in their resources and who can recognize needed resources contributed by outsiders, who are willing to serve on outside committees, who have skills in human relations, and who are attentive to the details of planning and organization contribute to collaborative relationships. Several authors have suggested the following strategies for developing productive collaborative relationships: (1) identify and clearly state specific purposes for desiring a collaborative relationship; (2) develop objective criteria for selecting partners; (3) locate possible partners; (4) negotiate specific written agreements; (5) consider all ideas so that final decisions will be fully supported; (6) determine communication mechanisms and use them frequently; (7) establish monitoring and evaluation procedures to correct problems; and (8) familiarize the staff of the participating organizations with the agreements. Some of the common types of collaborative arrangements in adult education are with business and industry, professional groups, and community economic development programs. (KC)

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COLLABORATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

OVERVIEW

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OVERVIEW



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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

COLLABORATION IN ADULT EDUCATION

What Is Collaboration?

Investigating collaboration, one will find a variety of terms applied indiscriminately (e.g., partnerships, linkages, cosponsorships, interagency or interorganizational cooperation) to many types of relationships between organizations. To qualify a collaborative relationship for this Overview, five criteria have been identified:

- Programs or projects are jointly designed and monitored.
- Some autonomy is sacrificed by participants.
- Resources are contributed.
- Organizations are mutually benefited.
- Administrators are actively involved or are supportive of the relationship and maintain final decision-making powers.

Advantages of Collaborative Relationships

Current issues are complex and funding is difficult as adult education providers try to meet the needs of the community, business, and industry; therefore, collaboration can be very advantageous. Information, ideas, and resources can be pooled, and duplication and harmful competition can be avoided. Beder (1984a) suggests that collaboration can be a major agency expansion strategy. Partners can provide useful information on needs assessments and program evaluation, suggestions for curriculum development, participants, use of facilities and/or state-of-the-art equipment, specialized staff, and additional revenue from increased enrollments or from donations. If these resources are used by the education agency to provide quality educational programs, power and prestige increase, expanding options for programing and marketing.

Features of Productive Collaborations

Institutional Factors

In spite of the numerous benefits of collaboration, some relationships have failed to accomplish desired objectives and have been terminated, resulting in negative relationships among participants and frustrations over unproductive investments of time and resources. Beder (1984b) identifies four dominant themes that are important for successful relationships:

- **Reciprocity**—There must be a balance in giving and receiving resources and in giving up domain and power. Each participant must perceive that resources less valued are being exchanged for resources that are more valued.
- **System Openness**—External relationships should be actively sought, and there should be a receptiveness to external perspectives.
- **Trust and Commitment**—Organizations cannot relinquish autonomy or perpetuate their collaborative relationship without trust and commitment. The level of trust and commitment can be affected by the history of past collaborative efforts and the styles and personalities of the people involved.
- **Structure**—The compatibility of organizational structures and cultures is an important factor. Fluid, flexible organizational structure helps partners adapt to one another and creates an environment of openness and receptivity.

Personal/Individual Factors

Obviously, the people participating in a collaborative relationship will contribute to its success or failure. The summary of a study that explored the benefits and problems of collaboration of 247 organizations (Hohmann 1985) identifies the individual behavior of administrators as having significant consequence. The following behaviors characterize administrators who are effective collaborators:

- The ability to recognize the value and bargaining power of resources in hand and to identify outsiders who can contribute needed resources
- The willingness to serve on committees and boards outside their organizations to develop networks that could lead to collaboration opportunities
- Skill in human relations and mediation
- Attentiveness to the details of planning and organization

Boundary spanners, individuals designated to represent an organization in a collaboration, profoundly influence their organization's perception of the relationship since information will be evaluated, interpreted, and selectively communicated at the spanner's discretion. The characteristics of the representative chosen can be indicative of the interest an organization has in the relationship. When there is a strong commitment toward expansion, high-level staff with the authority to contribute resources from their organizations are selected. These representatives communicate frequently with their organizations and are very influential in decision-making processes. If an organization desires to protect a domain rather than expand it, people in lower level positions who have little influence and communicate minimally are selected (Hohmann 1985).

Strategies

Several authors (Bovard and Silling 1986; Hemmings 1984; Hohmann 1985) suggest the following strategies for developing productive collaborative relationships:

- Identify and clearly state specific purposes for desiring a collaborative relationship
- Develop objective criteria for selecting partners
- Survey the environment to locate possible partners
- Negotiate written agreements that delineate organizational responsibilities, program design, fiscal arrangements, and established time frames
- Allow time during negotiations to consider all ideas and options, so that final decisions will be more fully supported
- Determine communication mechanisms and use them frequently
- Establish monitoring and evaluation procedures and channels to correct problems
- Familiarize the staff of the participating organizations with the agreements in the collaboration

Beder (1984b) warns that relying too heavily on one collaboration can threaten the autonomy of an organization; therefore, it is advisable to explore several options. Although developing a program with partners is more time consuming than working alone (Cervero 1984), planning time will diminish as the organization becomes more experienced.

Examples of Collaborative Arrangements in Adult Education

The literature contains many examples of collaborative arrangements developed by adult education providers. The following are some of the most common types.

Business and Industry

To meet their training needs, business and industry leaders can establish their own training centers or collaborate with existing adult education agencies. A major difficulty with such collaborative arrangements has been the educational institutions' rigid orientation toward emphasizing broad-based education, which includes theoretical background, and the orientation of business and industry toward practical, job-relevant knowledge (Fingeret 1984). Fearing loss of control, educational agencies are reluctant to allow business and industry to assist with developing and updating the curriculum. In spite of these deterrents, collaboration is still a desirable option because business and industry cannot underrate the need for educational program planning and teaching expertise and the cost-effectiveness factor. Educational institutions can become more flexible with registration procedures and scheduling, customize and update curriculum, and offer on-site instruction. In exchange they will receive the opportunity to increase enrollments and therefore revenue, increased visibility and credibility within the community, and the use of state-of-the-art technology and equipment while working directly in the business environment.

Professional Groups

According to Cervero (1984), interorganizational collaboration is extensively practiced by continuing professional education providers and colleges and universities. Among the advantages he lists are the following:

- More prestige from being associated with a college or university
- Closer links between preservice and continuing education
- Higher quality programs resulting from shared resources
- Increased visibility for partners
- Greater probability that there will be a sufficient number of participants
- Availability of competent instruction on specialized topics
- Increased referrals to the college or university

Community Economic Development Programs

From the various community economic and social structures emerge problems that necessitate programs in adult education: job obsolescence, unemployment, illiteracy, limited-English proficiency, and education and employment for older adults. Concerned agencies such as the state department of education, city government, social service agencies, an urban renewal committee, or a state employment commission may form an interagency collaboration council to identify resources for the needed programs, or it may choose to develop its own adult education center. Valentine's (1984) case study demonstrates the necessity of particularly competent leadership for this type of collaboration. Satisfying the diverse interests of program sponsors and program participants requires strong organizational, management, and interpersonal relations skills.

Conclusion

Collaborative relationships are desirable because they expand the capacity of the participants to accomplish objectives that could not be accomplished as well alone (Hemmings 1984). Additionally, as agencies work cooperatively, they learn about each other, understanding "what lies behind an organization's point of view, the constraints under which an organization operates, and the strengths and weaknesses" (p. 6). Successful collaborations are difficult to achieve because of the need to balance autonomy and involvement while sustaining the organizing force or goal (Hohmann 1985). Some key factors necessary for a productive relationship are trust, flexibility, cooperativeness, compatibility of organizational structures, sufficient planning and organization, competent leadership, and perception of mutual benefit.

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